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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the aspects of teaching the structural and semantic functions of the article in English. Writing samples from native Chinese- Japanese- Korean- Spanish- Farsi- French- Hebrew- Greek- Bengali- and Arabic-speaking ESL students illustrate the problems that exist in understanding the use of the determiner. Students are not aware of the particularizing functions of the determiner. They either prefer not to use it at all, in which case they get a telegraph-like style, or to use it randomly, hoping it will be correct. Factors which determine the use of "the" and "a" are reviewed and examples are provided for illustration. (JK)

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DETERMINING THE DETERMINER: ASPECTS OF TEACHING THE AND A IN ESL

by

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DETERMINING THE DETERMINER: ASPECTS OF TEACHING THE AND A IN ESL

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My work in the determiner started when I was trying to find a way to teach the and a to students of English as a second language. I started this study with considerably more confidence at the beginning than I have now, because my own conclusion is that determining the use of the determiner is slippery. My reason for this conclusion is that research in this area is empirical and analysis of observable data is not always satisfactory. We are trying to abstract a structure of relationships from the observation of linguistic phenomena in natural language. Sometimes the road to a linguistic model seems circular because actual usage -- that is, linguistic events -- may be based on a semantic network of selectional restrictions on forms. Our model must account for apparent contradictions in the linguistic realization of strategies.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are constraints imposed by surface structure, even with many exceptions and idioms. We are just beginning to look into the contradictions we find in idiom for which there may be underlying structure. We have many questions and we are still not in agreement over the answers.

Lyons notes that at present the term determiner is a label used by linguists for a class of words which may

> include the definite and indefinite articles, the demonstrative adjectives, and a variety of other words for the primary semantic function of determining, i.e., restricting or making more precise, the reference of the noun phrases in which they occur. 1

In many ways, the use of determiners obeys constraints imposed by prescriptive grammatical categories. We cannot use a noun without making instant preliminary decisions about whether or not the referent is known to our listener, whether it is singular or plural, mass or non-mass, a class or particularized, and much more before we can use the determiners which are obligatory -- the, a, this, that, some, each or every -- or even whether not to

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1 John Lyons, Semantics, Vol. 2 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 452.

use a determiner at all. All of this information will be a factor in our selection.

The linguistic structural model, however, does not explicate the intuitive judgement native English speakers process in validating the semantic function of reference. As English first language speakers we internalize information so that we can swiftly select the determiner for precise semantic function. It is in this area that our ESL student whose first language has a different structure from English may have problems in selecting the determiner. The student will have to acquire semantic information as well as structural rules to attain proficiency in the use of the determiner.

In this paper I would like to consider the problems of ESL students of various language backgrounds in relation to the determiners the and a. I would like to look at aspects of teaching structural and semantic functions of the article.

As English speakers, we are unique in the particular way we segment or "frame" the world, to use Goffman's term.[2] The Chinese call us "the opposite people" because

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[2] Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

it seems to them that we do everything backwards. Instead of putting the family name first, and then the given name as they do, we do it the other way around -- first name and then family name. Unlike the Chinese, we do not note the date by putting the year first, and then month, and then day. We record the date by month, day and year. And when we write an address, we do not put the country first, then state, then city, then street, and then number, as the Chinese do. We write number, street, city, state and country.

In the languages too, we are "opposite people". Mandarin Chinese is a classifier language, as are also Korean and Japanese. Classifiers are used in referring to particular kinds of entities, e.g. human beings, birds, animals, plants, flat objects. Lyons points out that the Chinese have a choice in using a semantically neutral classifier so that they may say "three entity book" or "three flat entity book", "three entity man" or "three human entity man". In this way they make individuation and enumeration.

In Lyons' theory, the difference between English and the so-called classifier families is that in English we are doing with our determiners what they are doing with the component of entity. That is, we are presupposing the

possibility of individuation and enumeration by definitiveness of reference. We make grammatical distinction between countable and noncountable nouns. Our referring expressions distinguish individuals from classes of individuals in the same way as the classifiers make distinction by entity.[3]

The difficulties of students whose first language is a classifier language -- and even students from Indo-European languages -- are apparent if we look at the attached illustrations of samples of writing. If we look at the excerpts of English composition of students from classifier languages we can see the students have problems in finding ways to handle classification in English.

CHINESE

RULE: CHINESE HAS NO DEFINITE OR INDEFINITE ARTICLE

Shanghai is a largest city in China. San Jiao-di is a largest market in Shanghai

There is a young tree so fresh, so lovely. it seems has the full energy of the life.

The Chinese student is using a and the indiscriminately -- "a largest city", "a largest market", "the life".

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[3] John Lyons, Semantics, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 188

JAPANESE HAS NO DEFINITE ARTICLE OR INDEFINITE ARTIQE AS WE KNOW IT

If we look at Japanese, there is a counter system of counting any object based on shape, whether it is animate or inanimate, used as suffix on the noun. It would be a numeral plus something.

"Hiki" - animal

ni - two

enoo - dog

To say "two dogs" - "enoo ni hiki"
"dog two animal"

"two cocker spaniels" becomes "cocker spaniel ni hiki"
"cocker spaniel two animal"

My brother is Univercity student, too.
He is Freshman now. He is studing economics.
He can play Football very well.

I have mother, father and sister.
Mother as a good housewife. She likes

The Japanese student sample of writing also has problems with the use of the determiner. "My brother is University student" ..."He is freshman now"...I have mother, father, and sister"...

KOREAN

Although the State Legisture approved the purchase of 550 love canal homes, many families still wait for local bureaucracy to secure the pagments. Although the State has approved $5 million for a purchasing corporation, no such legal entity has been established yet.

My country is Korea. I have lived im Seoul since 1970. Seoul is very big city. So there are many markets im Seoul

The Korean student also shows the same discrepancies.

..."State legislature" ..."Seoul is very big city..."

SPANISH

RULE: THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE THE IS OMITTED AFTER THE VERB SER (TO BE) WHEN THE VERB IS FOLLOWED BY AN UNMODIFIED NOUN.

Five persons are my family, my father is doctor of animals. And he works for the goverment but he has a ranch

FARSI

FARSI HAS NO THE OR A ACCORDING TO OUR SYSTEM. FARSI HAS A MARKER RAW WHICH ACTS AS A PARTICLE AND DIRECT OBJECT MARKER

MAN KETAB RAW

I book (object) put etc. (that you know about)

YEK KETAB ROUYE MIZ AST

A book on desk is.

IF THERE IS NO INDEFINITE ARTICLE IT IS DEFINITE

A GENERIC CLASS IS ALWAYS SINGULAR

Men and Women have attraction for each other. Second reason is that this is a rule of Society S.I. 81

Bazar in Iran still has kept ancient trad. and Tourist still Can find antiques items in the place

FRENCH

RULE: NO ARTICLE IS USED BEFORE THE NAME OF A PROFESSION FOLLOWING ETRE (TO BE)

My husband is ∅ doctor in orthodontics, and I help him in his work.

HEBREW

In the front of the market there is food section, like vegtables, fruits, fish. In the back of the market there is clothes section in cheapest prices.

GREEK

The article about the nuclear threats against (the) human life, was an article against (the) nuclear power.

BENGALI

The premature arrival of future is 'future shock', i.e. (the) too much in very less time.

ARABIC

I'm not entirely against (P.o) nuclear power, because— at least it proves (His) man's ability in different fields; air and spaceships illustrate this very well. Yet I don't like any power

If we look at other languages we see that we have the same problems with lack of understanding in the use of the determiner -- Spanish, Farsi, French, Hebrew, Greek, Bengali and Arabic.

Our problem here is that the students are not aware of the particularizing functions of the determiner. They prefer not to use it if they can, in which case they get a telegraph-like style. Or they may use it randomly, hoping somehow they can get it right.

If we are to teach the use of the determiner in English to the ESL student, how do we go about it? Where do we begin. The answer is not simple. As part of a pilot project, I would like to review in an exploratory way some of the things we know about the semantic and structural functions of the determiner.

One way to go about our teaching might be to start

by teaching the notion of a referent. A referent is the thing or person in the outside world that the noun head refers to. We can then start with fundamentals in teaching the different usage and function of the and a.

The developed from the Old English thē which was a masculine demonstrative pronoun. The followed by a noun or noun equivalent indicates that the noun is definite. In Searle's definition (1969) in the speech act reference, the essence of definite reference is stated in terms of the two axioms of existence and identification.[4] The use of this level of definitiveness indicates that the reference is shared and known to the speaker and hearer.

A developed from Old English ān meaning one. The function continues today. A is also used as a function word before singular nouns when the referent is unspecified. Traditionally, this has been taught as "new information" and "old information". That is, where the referent is not familiar to the speaker and listener, the speaker is obliged to make his first reference with a, as in

"A cat was in the yard today."

The use of a signals that the cat is not known to either

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4 J. Searle, Speech Acts (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969)

speaker or listener. The cat is unspecified and this is "new information". In utterance, however, the information has now made the listener aware of a cat, knowledge he now shares with the speaker. The "new information" is now "old information". The cat exists and is identified. It is no longer unspecified but it is now definite. Reference to the cat is now made with the definite determiner the and continues in this way:

"The cat was black."

In addition to Searle's identification of the important function of "existential understanding" -- that is, understanding between speaker and listener -- the use of the and a is determined by the following factors, as noted by Frank:[5]

1. Whether the noun head is singular, plural or countable

   as in a chair, the chairs

2. Whether the noun head now has a classifying function

   as in the or a lion is large

The uses of the, on the other hand, can be exclusive

1. Before a definite noun head previously by context or circumstance

   the president, the Lord, the Mayflower

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[5] Marcella Frank, Modern English (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 125, passim.

2. Before a branch of human endeavor

   the law

3. Before many geographical names

   the United States, the Dominion of Canada

4. Before points in time

   in the future, the past

5. Before physical positions

   the top, the back

6. Before musical instruments

   play the piano

7. Before ordinals

   the fifth day

8. Before superlatives

   the happiest girl

and also, in the following special ways:

1. Taking on suprasegmental stress -- that is, stress that we show by vocal emphasis -- to show uniqueness

   He is the man to go to

and, in another way:

2. Before body parts where the noun head is in a prepositional phrase. Here the determiner becomes the equivalent of the possessive

   as in

   hit in the head, wrinkles on the face

The last notion is of particular interest in view of what

Hawkins (1980) calls a surface definite article. I will refer to the indefinite article with body parts later in this paper.

In other usage

3. The can also function as an adverb
   He works the hardest

The last function of the as a definite determiner is in a large group of idioms and it is this usage which I would like to discuss. According to Frank (1977), we particularize our external environment by the use of the as a function word before the name of a commodity or any familiar part of daily life in such idioms as

wash the dishes
make the bed
take out the garbage
go to the bathroom
walk into the house

The question is, when there has been no previous reference to the noun head in verbal discourse, why do we use the definite article? Frank feels that our familiarity has already identified the object, so that we are not constrained to use a, as is our obligation with new information. On the other hand, Hawkins[6] theorizes that definite noun phrases may be transformationally complex so

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[6] John A. Hawkins, "On Surface Definite Articles in English" from The Semantics of Determiners, edit. Johan Van der Auera (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1980), p. 41.

that the underlying structure may be indefinite. In transformation, according to Hawkins, the definite article may derive from an indefinite article in the underlying structure, so that we may be talking about

dishes (which I wash)

a bed (which I make)

garbage (which I take out)

a bathroom (which I go to)

a house (which I walk into)

Other idioms which take the include old, aphoristic constructions, as in

the sooner, the better

the more, the merrier

and proverbs like

The early bird catches the worm

Now I'd like to look at the indefinite determiner a. The indefinite determiner has two broad functions, one of which we have already seen in the notion of reference. The other function is that of singularity--that is, when we speak of one. In this function, a appears in several ways:

1. As the actual number one

   We saw a lion

2. As an undifferentiated specimen in a class

   We saw a lion in the zoo

3. To introduce an appositive

Mary, a waitress, works hard

And one more precise function, not generally recognized, noted by Hawkins (1980):

4. To show possession of body parts when there are more than one

as in

Fred lost a leg in the war

In this context, however, semantics plays a role in the restrictiveness of a noun modifier within an indefinite noun phrase.

Hawkins argues that definite descriptions (that is, using the determiner the) refer inclusively to all (the relevant pragmatically delimited) objects. That is, as example:

I broke the large incisor

could mean I have no large incisor left.

Indefinite descriptions (that is, using the determiner a) refer exclusively to not-all, i.e., there are claimed to exist other objects which are excluded from the reference of an indefinite description exclusive to not-all. As example:

I broke a large incisor

could mean I still have large incisors left.

Thus, the addition of a noun modifier right in

Fred lost a right leg in the war

Hawkins feels would mean the adjective right functions restrictively, that Fred has other right legs of which he

lost one during the war. In this case, to satisfy the pragmatic interpretation, the definite possessive determiner his is required

Fred lost his right leg in the war

Hawkins' theory of function of the indefinite determiner a which I have just quoted

4. To show possession of body parts when there are more than one

is supported if we try to say:

Fred lost a nose in the war

The indefinite noun phrase implies not-all. That is, in this string, Fred may have other noses which he did not lose. The pragmatic domain of interpretation is thus in question, and again, the definite possessive determiner his is required.

Fred lost his nose in the war

The last area I would like to discuss in the use of the indefinite determiner a concerns the function of the indefinite determiner in figurative language. A is frequently used in simile and metaphor

as in

brave as a lion

my love is a red, red rose

strong as a bull

pretty as a picture

The indefinite determiner a is also used extensively in idiom, especially with an object after make and take, for example

make a fool of

make a living

make a fresh start

take a picture

take a stance

take a while

and also with an object after do, become, tell

do a favor

become a bum

tell a lie

The indefinite determiner a is also used in many prepositional phrases that denote time

in a week

for a month

in a hurry

around an hour

and in many transitional markers

as a rule

as a result

to take an example

Finally, I would like to look at the area where no determiner is used -- that is, the deletion of the and a. Sometimes, as Frank points out, the use of post-modifiers will delete the determiner before the noun

as in

Eggs in boxes won't break

Also, noncountable and plural nouns can delete the determiner,

as in

Sand is soft

Eggs are cheap

as well as the names of holidays

as in

Christmas

Easter

and the names of magazines

as in

Time

Newsweek

The names of familiar places also delete the determiner. That is, we go to school, or we return home, or go back to work. And across the border, in Canada, people go to hospital or go to University (but not on this side of the border).

The names of physical ailments do not take determiners

cancer

polio

smallpox

nor does generic reference by classification

mankind

lions

birds

nor do other broad divisions of the world and the universe such as continents

Africa

Australia

Alaska

and the divisions we make of outer space as in the planets by name

Venus

Mars

Earth

In idiom we have many phrases with no determiner which seem closely bound to personal emotions, for example:

to work heart and soul

to become man and wife

to shake hands with

to make love to

to take pride in

to make enemies with

and concepts

to fight for liberty

to work to death

to reject communism

At the beginning of this paper I noted that many times usage is contradictory. The tendency has been to label every divergence "idiomatic". But how do we identify the standard form and the idiom? In phrases of time, for example, we would need to make analysis and broad categories for determiner usage and deletion in the following:

in an hour

at the hour

to go by the clock

hour by hour

to have time

Learning the complexities of the determiner is indeed a complicated process. Much research remains to explain the native speaker's intuitive grasp in this area. In this paper I have attempted to bring together some of the traditional usage the ESL student must learn as a semantic network in English as thoroughly as he learns the lexical items, syntax, grammar and phonology.

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